

THE GREAT FIRE

Discussion Guide #3

Encourage critical thinking and support your students' literacy development by asking questions during reading. Here are some questions you can ask your readers to engage them in a discussion.

CHAPTER 6 "The Ghost of Chicago"	CHAPTER 7 Myth and Reality
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Comprehension

- Why did people struggle to access water after the fire was under control, and how did they create a short-term solution for the problem?

People could not access the city's water supply because the fire destroyed the Waterworks building. As a short-term solution, people used cars to power water pumps, and within a week, about a third of the residents could access the water.

- How did the mayor communicate that Chicago needed help, and how did people respond to his call for aid?

The mayor communicated Chicago's need for emergency relief through newspapers and telegraphs. Within a few days, people around the United States responded to the call for help by sending "collections of blankets, bedding, clothing, food, and cash." When news of the disaster reached Europe, people raised nearly one million dollars in cash and sent it to the city.

- After the fire, Claire attempted to reunite with her family. What made her search more difficult? How did her search end?

After the fire was under control, Claire returned to her house because she thought it would make sense for her family to look for her near their home if they survived the fire. However, Claire realized she couldn't find her house because the fire had destroyed the entire street. After waiting a while in an area resembling her home, Claire wandered the neighborhood and found her father waiting for her in front of their actual house. She had looked for her family on the wrong road! Then, she reunited with her whole family, who all survived the fire.

- In addition to opening hotels and working as construction laborers, some residents found clever ways to make money from the fire. Describe one small business and what it sold.

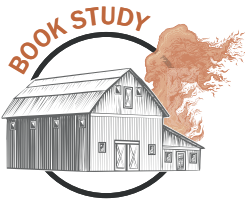
Student answers will vary but may mention that some children found melted candleholders, blackened plates, or fused-together pieces of silverware in the remains of the fire. They sold the items to tourists as "fire relics."

- Name one positive outcome that resulted from the rebuilding effort.

Student answers will vary but may note that many jobs existed for bricklayers, carpenters, and general laborers since there were widespread rebuilding efforts.

- What did Alfred Sewell predict about Chicago's future? Use a quote from the book to complete your answer.

He predicted the city would rebuild and be better than before the fire. He said, "The city will nevertheless rise again, nay, is already rising, like the Phoenix, from her ashes. And she will, we believe, be a better city as well as a greater one, than she was before her disaster."



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Comprehension (continued)

- Name two ways the antifire rules impacted residents' rebuilding efforts.

When the city enacted the antifire regulations, people were required to use more expensive materials, such as brick or stone, to rebuild their homes. As a result, residents struggled to afford the cost of building supplies in their city neighborhoods. If people wanted to use wood to build their homes, they had to move outside of Chicago's commercial district and away from their pre-fire neighborhoods.

Analysis

- Even though an official investigation declared her innocent, people blamed Mrs. O'Leary for starting the fire. Why might people blame her for the fire? Why do you think people searched for someone, or something, to blame for the start of the fire?

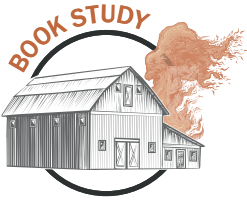
Many blamed Mrs. O'Leary for starting the fire because they wanted to hold someone responsible. Instead, they ignored the official inquiry and took rumors as fact. Student answers will vary for the second question but may include that people wanted to find a reason for the death and destruction caused by the fire. The Chicago citizens might've thought it would be easier to move past the tragedy by placing blame on someone or something.

- Describe what you see in the picture on page 133. What can you tell about the group of people in the picture? What do you think they believed about Chicago's future?

Student answers will vary but may note that the picture shows the huge mess created by the fire. There are pieces of wood, bent metal, huge piles of rocks, and parts of buildings as far as the eye can see. Four workers are standing on the rocks, trying to sort through the mess. Though their faces are blurry, they look tired yet focused on the task. They probably believed that Chicago could rebuild and that citizens must work hard to return the city to its former status.

- After the fire, some reports stated that "there had been little or no rioting or looting," illustrating a scene in which Chicago's citizens "seemed cool and collected." Other reports blamed certain groups of people for any and all problems that occurred during the fire. Despite the fact that there were issues in the wealthier neighborhoods—caused by the residents—the public was made to believe otherwise. Why do you think the newspapers and city leaders intentionally shared misinformation with the public? What does that tell you about society's beliefs about social class at the time?

Newspapers and city leaders claimed that any problems, such as looting and rioting, were caused by immigrants and those who lived in the less wealthy O'Leary neighborhood. These claims indirectly indicated that their friends and family—those from the wealthier class—were not at fault. This blame emphasized the further separation of the social classes: "...distancing the 'good and respectable' citizens of Chicago (that is, the better educated and wealthier) from the 'bad' ones who had rioted." At the time, people regularly blamed the poor for problems, and "those who controlled urban centers (business people, politicians, church leaders, and educators) tended to lump poverty, crime, and chaos together."



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Personal Connection

- After the fire, people started innovative small businesses like selling "fire relics" and salvaging metal from the rubble. If you could start a small business using resources you have access to today, what would you sell? Why?

Student answers will vary.